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ABSTRACT

The focus in this paper is on political styles, political organization, and political interaction among educational power persons and groups. Recent research studies by the authors have looked at teacher perceptions of their power over curriculum. Questionnaires and interviews were administered to a random sample of teachers in several Michigan school districts. The researchers found that teachers are undecided about their ability to influence curriculum policy-making, that material considerations are of much greater importance than curriculum and that administrators have authority over curriculum but the board has more influence on material considerations. Current research by the authors investigates whether principals are "bureaucratic organization men" or "negotiator statesmen." Questionnaires and interviews will be completed by elementary school principals in Michigan. Preliminary findings indicate that community conflict and principal alienation are positively correlated, bureaucrats outnumber "negotiators," and principals are more affected by internal than external political turbulence. The authors maintain that principal training is lacking in courses on educational processes. In response, educational administration departments need to take a more multidisciplinary social science approach, including theories of social organization and political process and group dynamics analysis. (Author/JM)

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# THE PROBLEMS OF SCHOOL PEOPLE AS POLITICAL ACTORS:

# SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

to the

Midwest Educational Research Association

Toledo, Ohio

October 17, 1980

by

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As a sociologist and political scientist respectively, we have had a long standing interest in educational politics and policymaking and, as a result, we focus here on political styles, political organization and political interaction among educational power persons and groups.

The Teacher (past research)

We have been involved with several research efforts on teachers and the public schools recently. One set of these studies focuses on teacher sense of power relative to curriculum. We looked at a single Detroit suburban school district, as well as at a 3 district comparison, blue collar, middle class and affluent communities. These were questionnaire and interview studies of random samples of teachers.

We were concerned with determining what group or individual (superintendent, principal, parent groups, school board or other teacher) might be perceived as possessing power or perceived threat of sanction on curriculum. We asked questions like:

1. To what extent do teachers perceive themselves in control of curriculum?
2. Who has the greatest power on curriculum, who makes the decisions?
3. Is curriculum an issue for collective bargaining?
4. What person or group tends to be most threatening to teachers relative to curriculum?

We found that teachers are undecided about their ability to influence curriculum policy making, that material stakes were of much greater importance than curriculum, that a twin power hierarchy appears to be emerging where the administrators have the power and authority on the more technical issues such as curriculum and the board more influence on material stakes, the political issues. As to the community variables, the poor district evidenced much less

perceived sanction threat than the other two districts. In fact the relationship was somewhat like an inverted "U", with the middle district showing the most perceived sanction threat.

These findings suggest that the road to curriculum innovation within the school still lies in large part with the principal and superintendent. Teachers don't appear to be on the forefront of change here, even though their numbers and strategic position suggest the contrary. A telling comment of one respondent was "The auto unions don't negotiate the design of the car. They negotiate worker's wages for building it and the environment in which the car is built." But in this case, maybe the worker should be building the car.

Boyd in a provocative series of articles maintains that policy innovation in curriculum has lagged, even though pushed by the so-called professional reformers. They have had very little impact on the classroom or made for any real reform. Beyond the looseness of federal system, and the conservative mobilization of bias (or the dominance of culturally homogeneous communities or states making for narrow and limiting curricular choice) and the like, there is little or no incentive for reform and innovation within the school itself. Few rewards exist for excellence within the nonprofit, monopolistic milieu of the public schools. Assured of a captive clientele, and utilizing a "lockstop" reward system based upon seniority rather than merit, the public schools scarcely provide a climate conducive to risk-taking, experimentation, and responsiveness to consumers.

Boyd suggests some variant of the voucher plan, which would free the school for experimentation and from the charge of being all things to all persons. To date even a modified voucher plan has been tried nowhere, in large part because of the resistance of teachers themselves. What can be

done about current lack of incentives that might facilitate reform if a voucher system could not be swallowed? A more modest suggestion would be adopting a merit system whereby rewards for curriculum innovation be made part of a contract package. And less affluent school districts would seem to be a good place to institute this reform, given the findings from our research.

The Principal (present research)

We are currently conducting a study entitled "Coping with Political Turbulence: The Political Styles of Elementary School Principals." Our perspective in this research project and, therefore, in this presentation, differs considerably from the typical studies conducted by educational researchers who investigate school organization and administration. As to the rationale of our study, a truism even if a mass media cliche is that "School administrators are 'burning out'."

Clearly principals have become targets of multiple and contradictory societal demands. Even more, they are caught in the cross-fire between the central office and teacher unions, where metropolitan principals, in particular, are said to be increasingly overwhelmed by their occupational position. While local educational actors such as superintendents and school boards, have been subjected to extensive empirical research (Zeigler, et. al., 1974), the systematic investigation of principals' political behavior has been much less so (Cooper, 1978). A considerable body of literature does exist which focuses on differential job satisfaction of principals (Erickson and Reller, 1978), but there is no research which centers on their perceptions of themselves functioning in their societal and school political environments. And there are no measures of their behavior in such a manner

as to generate theory about political leadership styles. Such conceptualization would, in turn, permit inferences about who among these principals is likely to survive (and even thrive), and who is unlikely to cope ("burn out"). To develop a provisional model of the political behavior of principals is the overriding objective of this research project. A focus on metropolitan elementary school principals given their large numbers and strategic location between community and school power systems should better promote the realization of the preceding research goal. The choice of Michigan is warranted by the fact that, as an old core industrial state, it is representative of the nations politico-economic and educational problems.

In order to go beyond the simple question of whether or not metropolitan elementary school principals feel "overwhelmed," we employ a typology of educational leadership (Cuban, 1976; and Maccoby, 1976); and models of decision-making (Cuban, 1976; and Peterson, 1977). As to leadership types, we hypothesize that the vast majority of metropolitan elementary principals are bureaucratic-organization men trained for routinized-organizational processes while a new breed of negotiator-statesmen is emerging in response to intensified societal conflict. We anticipate that the bureaucratically-oriented principals will exhibit higher stress levels than their "gamesmen" counterparts who thrive on change and challenge.

Under the decisional models concept of socio-economic forces or environmental conflict targeted on principals, we expect that lower socio-economic neighborhoods will generate the most political turbulence for the schools and that this general situation will be positively correlated with a principal's sense of powerlessness (organization men more than gamesmen). We also hypothesize that there will be a direct relationship between the socio-economic status of the community and a shift away from an organization man

to a games-type principalship.

In those schools where an organizational decision-making mode (a network of standard operating procedures) prevails, the bureaucratic-type principal would be pronounced. By contrast, it is in political bargaining environments with their emergent interest groups requiring accommodation within the decisional process where the gamesman would be expected to thrive.

The research design combines a mail-out questionnaire and representative followup interviews which are targeted on elementary school principals in the southeastern metropolitan school districts of Michigan embracing Wayne (Detroit), Oakland and Macomb counties. Specifically, the sample of principals is drawn from 15 districts and is stratified into 5 districts from lower, middle and upper socio-economic levels. There are 150 respondents or 50 from each SES level and within each of these 10 are identified from each district.

The survey itself begins with the usual social background questions then moves into items concerned with job satisfaction and effectiveness (Hollow and Gemmill, 1976) and a sense of power scale (Moeller and Charters, 1976). To identify the various perceived sources of stress: extra-school pressures (community and group) and intra-school conflict (school board and teacher union), a sanctioning agents scale is designed (Zeigler, 1976). To operationalize the political-styles typology, items from Maccoby's interpretative questionnaire (1976) are selected and re-structured. Finally, inspired by Cuban's study of superintendents (1976), questions are generated which attempt to determine whether the decisional setting is either heavily bureaucratic or characterized by political bargaining within and outside the schools.

At this point in the research project the data are tentative and, therefore the findings are inevitably limited and provisional. First, within lower SES school districts, community conflict and principal alienation appear to be positively correlated. Second, bureaucrats greatly outweigh gamesmen in number, and they display greater alienation than gamesmen. Third, principals as unorganized middle management seem to be more affected by internal rather than external political turbulence. Finally, there is no clear relationship, as yet, between SES levels and leadership types; let alone between leadership types, types of political environment and the ability to cope. Incoming survey data and interviews should clarify this network of relationships.

Watson (197 ) has captured the flavor of the urban school administrator.

> The popular picture of the urban school principal is that of the man [and, one assumes, the woman] in the middle, caught up in a storm of angry and frequently contradictory demands. Besieged by noisy delegations of students, parents, teachers, or community residents, he finds himself simultaneously to blame for poor facilities, too much homework, insufficient time for faculty planning, and students' misconduct on the way to school. When he finally is able to close his office door, he is confronted by a desk full of forms to be filled out and telephone calls to be returned to the district superintendent, the curriculum office, and the personnel department. Should he ever venture from the comparative safety of his building, he is likely to run into representatives of the press or the local television station who are eager to record his feelings on the latest crises for those watching the evening news. Once he might have been the dignified scholar-statesman, presiding over serene classrooms of dutiful pupils. Today, he often resembles the unfortunate victim of a pack of avenging furies.

It is therefore no great surprise that when principals at all levels evaluate their administrative preparation, they point to a significant discrepancy between their academic training and the role demands of their principalship. In particular, fewer than 2 percent of elementary school

principals identified college preparation as a major determinant of their occupational success. While there are no data in this particular area, one can readily anticipate that principals would complain about not having been exposed in their academic preparation to a systematic analysis of and field experience in educational political processes.

Some Specific Recommendations

How can educational administration programs attempt to remedy this situation, at least, for the next generation of school people, especially principals? To begin with some significant curricular changes are suggested. Many educational administration departments have traditionally restricted their student's thinking to an organization perspective represented by POSDCORB (planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting) slightly leavened by human relations materials from psychology and sociology. What is needed is much more multi-disciplinary social science exposure from theories of social organization to political process and group dynamics analysis. While clearly inexact, the social sciences can provide a range of insights which might help principals deal with their multifaceted roles. In this regard, principals must be trained to become conceptualizers, mastering theory in order to use it respond to day-to-day demands, while simultaneously modifying their paradigms with pragmatic experience.

More specifically, how can departments of educational administration respond to this need of principals to become more effective political actors? What resources are available for the development of an educational politics curriculum?

First, in the last ten years, the politics of education has rapidly emerged as a significant social science sub-field involving both political

scientists, and sociologists as well as educational reseachers. There is now a large and growing literature which covers local-level school politics, but also state and national educational policy processes let alone, more recently, international comparisons of educational policy systems. Not only is there a host of journal articles which have beer increasingly codified in available bibliographies, but also there are now fine textbooks which provide an overview of the field (e.g. Thompson, 1976; Wirt and Kirst, 1972). The number of book length studies on more focused topics, e.g., school board politics has also rapidly expanded under the sponsorship of McCutchan Publishers, but, even more impressive, is D.C. Heath's Lexington Books in the Politics of Education series under the energetic editorship of the pre-eminent educational policy researcher Frederick M. Wirt; this series now entails more than forty books.

Another key resource in the study of educational politics is the burgeoning AERA Special Interest Group in The Politics of Education. This SIG, which is also entitled the Politics of Education Association, not only encompasses most every educationalist, sociologist and political scientist with an educational policy research involvement, but also has a large number of governmental policy analysts and actors. The PEA not only sponsors research, but, more pertinent to those interested in curriculum development, it is publishing an increasing number of bibliographies and literature reviews. Above all, the PEA represents a relatively easily accessed network of scholars which is large enough to be richly diverse and yet small enough to facilitate scholarly and pedagogical exchange.

More specifically, as politics of education researchers and teachers, the following represent some suggestions for a basic politics of education

course aimed at school principals. At the outset, we suggest that the professor provide a sketch of the political environment of the urban school principal. First, such a description would indicate that overall educational consolidation and expansion of the 1950's and 1960's has increased the layers of educational bureaucracy and thereby reducing the power of the principal. Relatedly, the traditional "management team" concept or a close working relationship between the superintendent and the building principal has been eroded. Third, teacher unionism has decreased the principal's administrative scope. Fourth, the principals, as the first tier of administration have had to continually and directly confront the anger of militant communities, especially poverty, and minority groups. Briefly then, the range of the principals power has been greatly reduced.

A conceptual scheme for undergirding the course in the form of power analysis would then be developed. After analyzing the implication of defining power as both the capacity to act and as a dynamic mutual assessment relationship, we would explore power in terms of a five-fold typology (influence, authority, sanctions, manipulation and force) each type itself being understood in terms of four behavioral dimensions: scope, weight, domain and base. On a more pragmatic level, there would be analysis of alternative power tactics at the disposal of educational actors including passive adaption, coalition, cooptation, bargaining and assertion. Allied to the preceding operational concern, it would be useful to consider the relative advantages of alternative power methodologies (positional, reputational and decisional) as potential tools of principals in their attempts to comprehend the structures of power in which they are enmeshed. In this regard, it would be useful to explore some of the ways in which principals actually have been trying to cope with their politically turbulent environments. One reponse is the

development of a power base among their constituents: parents, students and community activists. Another technique has been to seek power in numbers by attempts to unionize educational middle management. A third reaction has been to cultivate local political leaders like councilmen and/or to coopt local ethnic and racial organizations as a base of power.

Most of the course content would thrust on the local level of educational politics. The local educational policy process would be explored in two dimensions: the politics from within the schools, and the politics from without the schools. When considering within school politics, the following power actors would receive systematic attention: superintendents, school boards, teacher organizations and the principals themselves as emergent middle management. And in the extra school dimension, such political forces as community power structures, citizen participation movements and interest groups would be closely investigated. With increasing state regulation and financing of the schools, some attention should be given to the state educational governance structure: the legislature as the "big school board," state departments of education and the educational lobby corps.

The course content should not only represent a systematic investigation of relevant research, but also would attempt to understand the real world politics of the principalship. It would be very useful, then, to have weekly involvement of outside resource people--such educational policy actors as teacher union leaders, community activists and school board members. To complement this, the course participants themselves would be encouraged to do field research: observational and participant-observer studies of some aspect of the local educational policy process. Obviously, if any of them are already principals then they should be encouraged to systematically study the school power terrain in which they are located. In other words, such a course, by

continually bringing in actors from the educational policy arena and then getting its participants out into the school power world, would have the positive advantage of a practicum or workshop. And yet at the same time, it would have sufficient social science rigor in order to enhance the ability of the principals to conceptualize their own educational power environment.

Clearly, the preceding observations about the growing literature, the expanding scholarly network and the proposed course offering are merely suggestive of the wide range of resources that College of Education can avail themselves of if they decide to remedy this curricular deficiency in the area of educational politics and policymaking.